Language as We Know It, Literacy as We Know It, and Content Area Instructions:
Conscious Strategies for Teachers

By Kweku M. Smith

Critical transitive consciousness is achieved through a permanent process called conscientization.
—Paulo Freire, 1973

What goes on in the learner's head is dramatically influenced by what is already there.
—James Spencer, Winter 2001-2002

This article focuses on the process of promoting academic achievement for second-language learners by imaginatively connecting expository comprehension. The curiosity leading to the presentation of instructional strategies centers on what the teacher does during instructions and on students' activities (what the students do during instruction).

The critical discussion of reading in the content areas here is curiously framed in the broader context, thus providing a comprehensive program for second language speakers of English. In all grade levels, the academic and symbolic demands of constructing meaning from material creates issues of language as we know it, literacy as we know it, and access for teachers to infuse the core curriculum, particularly for teaching and learning (See Cummins' discussion of cognitively demanding; also see Wink, *Critical Pedagogy: Note from the Real World*, 2002, on conscientization, or recognizing that we know that we know).

The goals of this article are: (1) to increase understanding of instructional strategies among teachers at all levels that impact on reading comprehension in the content areas for second language speakers of English; (2) to provide curiosity and insight into the development of comprehensive instructional programs for linguistically and culturally diverse students; and (3) to suggest instructional strategies for what the teacher does during instruction and student activities (what the students do during instruction).

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Meeting Literacy Needs through Development of an Instructional Program

Vast differences exist in ESL students' levels of prior schooling and the opportunities they have had to develop high-level language and literacy in the home language. Family background of students also differs in terms of socioeconomic status, conditions under which they emigrated, degree of contact with home country, and parents' expectations for their child's academic achievements.

Critical factors inlcude ESL students' interests, habits, and attitudes toward the acquisition of English. Acculturation, accommodation, and assimilation also may play a role in creating diversity among students (Ovando & Collies, 1985).

A positive communicative environment is created when teachers at all levels obtain as much cultural, linguistic, and factual information as possible about the diverse student populations that they serve in the classroom. Cultural sensitivity and caution must be exercised, however, to ensure that students' background profiles do not turn into a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, teachers should not approach or engage their students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds who have had little education in their native countries with the assumption that it will be difficult or impossible for them to learn (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Skutunnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976, and California Department of Education, *Teachers Performance Assessment*).

Teachers should consider developing strategies in (1) Instructional Planning, (2) Students Activities, and (3) Progress Monitoring based on academic content. For example:

- **Instructional Planning:** The teacher presents to the whole class a comprehensive "picture" of the beginning of the Gold Rush by reading excerpts from biographical sources and leads a whole-class discussion. The teacher reads textbook passages (between students' silent and oral reading), and leads discussion about the concepts in the passages. The students are then asked to respond in writing to the questions in the book for homework, and to "send" a letter to a classmate for review. Students will then discuss the letter with their partners.

- **Students Activities**: Students will listen to excerpts from biographies and participate in classroom discussions; they will also complete written responses to question in the textbook for homework. In addition, students will listen to mock interviews and participate in class discussion. Groups of students will work to select a character from the biographies previously covered; the group members create and write the script

for an interview with the character and perform the interview for the entire class. Students will provide feedback to other groups.

- **Progress Monitoring**: The teacher will use class discussion, written response to questions, group role-playing or interviews, and a letter describing how life has changed for them. Students will receive oral feedback from the teacher, peer review and feedback on group work, as well as individual conferencing with the teacher when needed.

Language Focus Lesson

Language focus lessons (Gibbons, 1993; Herrell, A. L., 2000, p. 95) are lessons in which the focus is on English vocabulary and usage, rather than the curricular content. These lessons may involve exploration of content such as math, science, or social studies, but the focus of the lesson is on the language being used rather than the content itself.

The language selected for language focus lessons is based upon teacher observation and knowledge of the language forms and functions that give English language learners difficulty: for example,

(1) Observe your students and take notes on the types of language they tend to misuse. Plan time to work with small groups of students who have the same types of needs for direct instruction in language usage;

(2) Gather realia, visuals, and ideas for hands-on demonstrations of the language usage to be taught;

(3) Introduce the vocabulary and model its use, simultaneously using the language as you model. Give several examples for each term so that students can see when and how the language is used;

(4) Give the students an opportunity to actually perform or model a hands-on movement or activity as they use the focus language; and

(5) Design an activity that allows you to observe the students' mastery of the English language.

Teachers' Role Regarding Students' First Language

Success in a second language in academic settings depends greatly on the language based and literacy skill acquired in the first language (Cummins, 1989; Thonis, 1981). Programs that enable students to acquire initial literacy in their first language or to expand on literacy development already begun in the home country are often most effective with the mother tongue as an incentive.

Students who have developed strong linguistic knowledge in their own languages bring a broader range of skills and concepts about language to the task of acquiring English. In addition, with an appropriate focus on the use of the first language, parents can assume a larger participatory role in their own children's education.

In first-language programs, consideration should be given to the following questions:

Is supplemental reading material available in the first language for students to use for research projects, recreational reading, and other independent reading?

Do students have the opportunity to apply their first-language literacy skills by reading in the content areas?

Are students being given the message that bilingualism is an asset, and that English is to be added to their existing language skills?

In areas where large numbers of students speak the same native language, it is sound and feasible to provide concept instruction in that language. When this is not possible because of a lack of bilingual teachers, it is still advisable to provide some primary-language support in the content areas for newly arrived ESL students.

This may take many forms and factors: for example, use can be made of teacher assistants and other paraprofessional help, peer or cross-age tutors and community volunteers, and materials can be printed in the students' native language or mother tongue.

Clarification of Concept in the First Language

In SDAIE classrooms, students are afforded opportunities to learn and clarify concepts in their own language. Where possible, the teacher provides first language resources (print material, electronic and personnel) that can help students with key concepts. While SDAIE teaching involves presenting subject matter in English, teachers continue to provide opportunities throughout the lesson for students to clarify their understanding using their first language.

Use of the first language is still a controversial issue and many teachers shy away from it on the mistaken belief (perpetuated by decades of language-teaching methodology that actively discouraged it) that if students use their first language, it detracts from their development of English proficiency. However, research continues to show that when students are able to use their first language, they make more academic gains in both content and language than if they are prohibited from using it (Collier, 1995).

As Saville-Troike (1984) stated regarding the children in her study, "Most of the children who achieved best in content areas, as measured by tests in English, were those who had the opportunity to discuss the concepts they were learning in their native language with other children and adults" (p.216).

Instructional Conversation

Teachers using instructional conversations make the following instructional modifications:

- Arrange the classroom to accommodate conversation between the teacher and a small group of students on a regular and frequent schedule.
- Have a clear academic goal that guides conversation with students.
- Ensure that student talk occurs at higher rates than teacher talk.
- Guide conversation to include students' views, judgments, and rationales, using text evidence and other substantive support.
- Ensure that all students are included in the conversation according to their preferences.
- Listen carefully to assess levels of students' understanding.
- Assist students' learning throughout the conversation by questioning, restating, praising, encouraging and so forth.
- Guide the students to prepare a product that indicates that the goal of the instructional conversation was achieved. (*Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence [CREDE], 1999).*

Development of Language and Literacy in English as a Second Language

For speakers of other languages who do not receive significant first language instructions in English-speaking schools, it is particularly important to provide a print-rich material language development pro-

gram in English. Children who enter the system without already-developed literacy, or those who will be dealing with print for the first time in English must be placed in contexts where they can comfortably construct meaning.

English-development activities should be student-centered and continue building on the learners' interest, curiosity, and strengths. Teachers should consider the following critical questions when designing ESL programs:

> (1) Are second- language learners who are new to English given the opportunity to perform multiples of language tasks involving realistic or meaningful communication?
>
> (2) Do they receive understandable language and multi-sensory input throughout the day?
>
> (3) Do they engage in reading and writing for curiosity as well as for authentic purposes daily?
>
> (4) Are the reading selections at the appropriate level of complexity, based on the students' evolving language and literacy skills in English?
>
> (5) Are second-language learners encouraged to be curious and to take risks with language?
>
> (6) Do they have adequate access to challenging subject matter material and expository text delivered with a language-sensitive approach?

Preparing to Work with Expository Text Focusing

If you are a classroom teacher with no specialized training in linguistics, how do you present content texts to student who have multiple language and literacy backgrounds? Start by asking yourself some critical questions:

> How does any youngster come to comprehend and glean new information from text?
>
> Why are some students better with text material than others?
>
> What has worked well for students I have taught in the past?

Create a list of effective or successful strategies you have used in your teaching career. Just as students who are acquiring English are adding English to an existing language base, teachers can build on their on their repertoire of successful instructional approaches.

Purposeful consideration must be given to modifying these techniques to accommodate the wide range of second-language proficiency among the students. The critical focus will then be on what the students can do in terms of language tasks, and what the instructor can do to make the messages comprehensible and understandable.

Teacher Delivery

In a language classroom, the focus must be on language and literacy development. In a content classroom, teacher and students are concerned with the subject being studied. In ELD classrooms, teachers and students focus on both language and content.

Through modifications in their own talk, conscious attention to clarification, appropriate questioning strategies, and an understanding of when and where to deal with grammar and treat errors, teachers can provide a rich learning environment that promotes both language and content knowledge (Diaz-Rico, L., & Weed, K., 2002)

Analyzing the Text

Content should be used purposefully for comprehensive conceptual development. It is critically important for all students to be exposed to a variety of educational experiences designed to connect facts and concepts as well as to broaden understanding of text constructs. Expository text must not be approached as "connected cover" in the course of a semester or academic year, but rather as one of the many tools used by the student to uncover new ideas, concepts, and information.

When teachers suggest practical applications that are helpful in facilitating access to the content and have also proven to be effective with native-English speakers, their emphasis on concept development makes them particularly useful for ESL students. In the preliminary planning stage the teacher may find it useful to incorporate one or all of the following steps:

- **Vocabulary Role Play** (Herrell, 1998) is a strategy that is used to encourage learners to make connections among their past experiences, the content currently being studied, and vocabulary that is new or being used in an unfamiliar way. Students are introduced to new vocabulary and given an opportunity to discuss and use the vocabulary in context through role-playing. Often several groups of students are given the same vocabulary and asked to write and perform skits in which the vocabulary words are used and demonstrated. Since the groups are likely to write and perform skits in which the vocabulary words are used in different contexts, the skits serve to show multiple uses of the same words. In this way, English language learners are given an opportunity to see or experience the vocabulary words used in context, as well as demonstrating several different contexts in which the words may be used appropriately.

- **Key Concepts and Main Ideas** (Schifini, A., 1994). Revisit the work to determine key concepts and main ideas. Connect with your own subject or the school's curriculum guide or course of study. Look through the summary, chapter questions, and teacher's guide to refine choices. Keep in mind that many texts contain professional details — that is, facts teachers of the subject find interesting. If these facts are simply presented to students to be memorized without connection to concepts or referents that are meaningful to them, the information will not be retained for longer periods. Begin to consider how second-language learners can attain and use the concepts best, which is not necessarily the way the concepts were presented to you when you were a learner.

Assisting Our Students To Understand Content Material

Tapping, Focusing, Connecting, and Building on Students' Background Knowledge

The reading process, simply stated, is one in which the reader brings his or her linguistic and world knowledge to print to connect and construct meaning. A key component for all readers is prior knowledge, existing knowledge or schemata.

Several studies of second-language speakers and reading comprehension indicate that prior and existing cultural experiences are extremely important in comprehending text (Johnson, 1982; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979). In many cases cultural origin of text plays a greater role in comprehension than does language complexity (Johnson, 1981).

Experienced teachers, as well as teacher candidates, should tap and focus the prior knowledge of all their students. Building a background, or inducing schemata, is particularly important for non-native speaker of English, especially those who have very low levels of English proficiency (Hudson, 1982).

In general, research has shown that

successful background-building activities involve one or multiples of the five senses; they integrate listening, speaking, and reading, and are motivating. Begin with simple, straightforward activities that are easy to carry out.

- **Guided Reading** (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) is an approach to teaching reading in a small group setting, while providing individual coaching. The students are taught in groups of four to six, all reading at approximately the same level. Teachers use running records to determine the students' reading levels, their use of cueing systems (attention to phonics, meaning, word order, sentence structure, and the relation of the text to the students' prior experiences). Running records also determine the students' use of self-correcting and their attention to self-monitoring of whether or not their reading is making sense.

  A guided reading, as we know it, is a lesson that begins with a book walk, in which the students and teacher look through the book and predict what will happen. It then progresses through multiple readings of the book with students reading to themselves at their own pace. During this time, the teacher moves from child to child in the group, listening to them read and given them coaching on decoding, self-monitoring, and comprehension strategies. This coaching is accomplished by asking the student questions like "Does that word start with a d?" or "Does that make sense?" The students continue to read until each child has been coached.

  Experienced teachers or teacher candidates then conduct mini-lessons based upon the needs of the students identified during the coaching sessions. Teachers and students use this opportunity to discuss the story and determine whether or not the students need support in understanding what they have read. Vocabulary is discussed, clarifying and relating it to the story, the connections or the illustrations and the students' background experiences. Students in groups may engage in writing, phonics or other skills activities.

  The guided reading approach is very appropriate for English language learners because of the focus on vocabulary encountered. They benefit from the language interaction and opportunities for verbal interactions. Because the English learners' needs may be different from those of native English speakers, the individual coaching provides the teacher with an opportunity to support their understanding, correct pronunciation, and clarify the meaning of words as well as misconceptions caused by reading in their second language (Herrell, A., 2000, p. 66).

Critical Strategies and Concepts

Teachers of English-language learners need to remember to keep the learner's affective filter low. Affective variables relate to the success in second language acquisition, and affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and commonsense should be encouraged in the classroom.

Teachers should also remember to teach ESL learners about the *why* and *how* questions. When reading complex text it is often useful to pause and ask *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*. The crucial point: what goes on in the learner's head is dramatically influenced by what is already there. Knowledge is personal. To effectively promote learning, the teacher needs to know what the students already know and what is going in their minds, and must be able to ascertain when a student is having difficulty (Spancer, J. N., Winter 2001- 2002).

Directions To Connect our English Learners and their Future

Instructional approaches discussed in this article are uniquely straightforward and critically connected to teaching and learning. They build on students' and teachers' strengths to enable them to interact with and construct meaning from reflective thoughts, common sense and notions about how we come to know language and acquire literacy.

Most content involves the careful planning of both content and language objectives and the selecting, modifying, and organizing of materials and text that support those objectives. Objectives are critical and necessary to guiding teaching. For example, a lesson with a clear objective focuses instruction by concentrating on a particular goal and guides the teacher to select those learning activities that accomplish the goal.

If the teacher is not clear on the objectives of a lesson, then it is difficult to assess student learning. Once objectives are clearly stated, then the teacher selects material that will help students achieve those objectives (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002).

Experienced content area teachers already use some of these approaches. As they encourage even more interaction and thereby set up new social contexts in their classrooms, a greater number of students will be able to engage in acts of real literacy, as we know it — that is, in purposeful, meaningful reading, writing, and reflection.

However, there is still much work to be done in ensuring students are able to construct meaning and acquire new information from content area texts. In broad terms, consideration must be given to the following goals if we are to sustain academic achievement, particularly for second-language learners:

(1) research on various program designs that foster literacy and access to subject matter for linguistically and culturally diverse students;

(2) research and teacher training in the area of authentic assessment of subject-matter mastery;

(3) teacher training in the areas of first- and second-language and literacy development as well as reading in the content areas;

(4) the development and utilization of a wide range of print and visual materials in conjunction with expository text; and

(5) the development of multimedia materials tied to core curriculum in several of the principal primary languages of our students.

With fully coordinated efforts of teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, policymakers, parents, and community members, the goals of high levels of literacy and conceptual development for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations can be achieved.

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